

Cogitare et volvere

Thoughts & Reflections

Questioning and Curiosity: Traits of Great Directors

In today's boardroom, constant change and increasing complexity are the norm. Directors who are curious enough to learn and confident enough to question that which they do not know are essential assets. Robert Burton's book "*On Being Certain*¹" outlines a well-recognised human frailty. We think we know more than we do. Burton suggests this feeling of "knowing" creates a "certainty epidemic". We easily identify those afflicted by this epidemic through the claim that they "know that they are right." It is within this leap from being sure we are right (99%), to guaranteeing we are right (100%) that we remove any tolerance for conflicting opinions or questioning. Leading to an almost fundamentalists belief in their own pure and certain knowledge.

In an age of instant answers and where so much of what we know is subject to revision or becoming obsolete. Directors with the skills required to ask informed, searching questions are both highly sort after, and rare. Those directors who have these skills, typically self-identify as "restless learners". Restless learners are those, who recognise that their topic/subject expertise, needs continuous updating, while they must understand pertinent new fields of knowledge. The need to be a restless learner and an understanding of one's own knowledge limitations are attributes boards should value and nurture in current members and seek in prospective directors.

Identifying the restless learners within your board and in candidates is critical to improving the performance of the board. What boards don't need are directors who believe their cup of knowledge is full and need's neither replacement nor topping up. Highlighting a significant issue for boards in today's fast-changing environments; some directors' unlimited ability to ignore their own ignorance, and a board's unwillingness to confront it.

Sir Ken Robinson² identified that "In our culture, not to know is to be at fault, socially". Creating a boardroom culture which inhibits questions and diminishes the value of curiosity. Leads to an unwillingness by directors to ask questions that may identify them as not knowing something that everyone else seemingly knows lots about. Destroying an opportunity for the entire board to improve their knowledge.

Ideally, directors should inhabit the two zones of "restless learners" world. First, the continuous search for understanding and knowledge on that which they know nothing, second, the realisation that the acquired skills and knowledge of yesterday must be continually updated to reflect today's knowledge. For boards with a majority of directors who do not inhabit these two zones the outcome will be a form of disastrous myopia. That results in the board being doomed like Sisyphus to repeating the task, using the same available knowledge again and again with ever diminishing returns.

Replacing directors who hold a fundamentalists belief in their own knowledge. With directors who are restless learners and developing a culture that values curiosity and questioning, should be the focus for boards and Chair's as they navigate 2021.

¹ http://www.rburton.com/i_on_being_certain_i_believing_you_are_right_even_when_you_re_not_63166.htm

² <https://www.brainpickings.org/2012/04/17/sir-ken-robinson-school-of-life/>

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